

The following letter was sent to the President | by USCIRF

November 14, 2011

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), allow me to wish you a safe and productive visit to Indonesia for the East Asia Summit. We recognize that Indonesia is a priority for your Administration's engagement with both Asia and the Muslim-majority world.

Indonesia is a historically tolerant nation that is struggling with a growing intolerance. We believe your Administration is uniquely positioned to address ongoing religious freedom problems in Indonesia. We urge you to use your visit to raise these concerns openly with Indonesians and give priority to religious freedom and related human rights in U.S.-Indonesia relations.

There are strong political forces, terrorist networks, and extremist groups that continue to be serious obstacles to Indonesia's democratic trajectory and a source of ongoing violations of religious freedom and related human rights. The Administration should see religious freedom as an interest intertwined deeply with U.S. security, economic, and political interests in Indonesia and as a critical component of better U.S.-Indonesia relations. A creative and sustained diplomacy that protects and advances religious freedom can positively affect a whole range of issues, from the rule of law to the rights of women, from the protection of religious minorities from societal violence to the development of social capital that ensures economic growth. U.S. policy and programs should reflect this reality and focus on bolstering Indonesia's ability to

address past religious freedom problems and face new ones.

USCIRF remains concerned about the troubling rise in societal violence experienced by religious minorities and human rights defenders at the hands of extremist groups seeking to enforce one version of religious orthodoxy. Too often the police and local government officials tolerate or aid this violence and courts do not sufficiently punish perpetrators. Over the past several months, a Christian church was forcibly closed in West Java, a suicide bomber attacked a Protestant church in Central Java, Baha'is were detained on charges of proselytizing children in East Java, sectarian tensions re-emerged in Ambon, and individuals who murdered defenseless Ahmadiyah Muslims were given light sentences.

We understand that the influence of extremist groups far exceeds their size or electoral appeal and have applauded President Yudhoyono's public defense of religious tolerance. Nevertheless, religious leaders and civil society representatives have expressed to us their lack of confidence in the Indonesian government's ability to address fully ongoing issues of police impunity or societal violence. In some parts of Indonesia a culture of impunity exists in which extremist groups operate with little or no consequences, harassing places of worship, extorting protection money from religious minorities, and pressuring local officials to detain and restrict allegedly heterodox religious groups. Such situations are the main source of religious freedom abuses in Indonesia and undermine faith in Indonesian democracy and court system.

During your visit and after, we hope you will speak out publicly about why religious freedom protections, particularly as they relate to the rule of law, are a critical element of bilateral relations and pivotal to the development of free, prosperous, and peaceful societies. We believe that the vast majority of Indonesians will warmly receive this message. We also urge the Administration to develop with Indonesia a regular human rights dialogue. Such a dialogue would establish a structure through which rule of law and human rights concerns, including religious freedom restrictions and violations, could be discussed.

We hope your visit will further deepen bilateral relations, binding our democracies in shared efforts to advance universal freedoms and build partnerships that will have a profound effect, both within Indonesia and beyond.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo Chair